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ABSTRACT

There is little question that the primary element regarding school desegregation is the latent and overt racism pervading American society. Perhaps it is unrealistic to suggest that the school, the transmission belt of American mores from one generation to the next, is likely to intervene in the already existing pattern. Moreover, statements and actions of the national administration do not always serve the cause of equality of educational opportunity. However when there is no commitment at the local level, it is unreasonable to expect that something will happen at the national level. Another deterrent to racial integration is a growing resistance from many white ethnic groups to recent social and educational gains by blacks and other socially visible minorities. While it may not be an exact parallel, the reactions of the more militant and dissatisfied elements of minority communities may also be serving as a deterrent to desegregation. One of the more covert deterrents is the developing pattern of teacher organization and teacher militancy. The equating of compensatory education with desegregation of schools exemplifies a critical kind of racism prevalent in our society. The process of integration, moreover, has failed to receive full attention once black and white children are together in the classroom. (Author/JM)

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What's Really Blocking School Desegregation?

by Morton J. Sobel

What is blocking school desegregation? Although some progress has been made, I feel we must assess why results have not been more commensurate with the broadest and most sweeping U.S. Supreme Court decision in the history of human rights, *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* (1954), eighteen years ago. What follows is my perception of the factors which have caused segregated schools to persist until now. Furthermore, I have suggested some steps toward overcoming obstacles to classroom integration, obstacles which are closely bound up with barriers to desegregation.

In my mind, there is little question that the primary element retarding school desegregation is the latent and overt racism pervading American society. Four years after the Kerner Report, no real progress has been made toward implementing any of its recommendations for alleviating racism and racial polarization. "Racism in America and How to Combat It" from the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and "Institutional Racism in America" from the Mid-Peninsula Christian Ministry, as well as articles reviewing research published recently by the *Harvard Educational Review*, all toll the same bell. Racial antagonism, according to these authorities, is a pervasive, debilitating, and divisive thread intricately woven into the fabric of American life.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to suggest that the school, the transmission belt of American mores from one generation to the next, is likely to intervene in the already existing pattern. Perhaps because the schools are a major societal institution, attempts to change individuals there are non-productive, maybe even counter-productive. We expect individual teachers, administrators, school board members, and others in the educational establishment to demonstrate one standard pattern of behavior and attitude in the face of the many heritages which make up our society. They forget, perhaps, that the schools can serve not only as reinforcers of the past, but as initiators of change, as well. The institution goes on, and individuals tend not to break the pattern. Of course, none of this is an attempt to condone either individual or societal racism.

Moreover, statements and actions of the national administration do not always serve the cause of equality of educational opportunity. When elected officials at the highest levels of government or appointed bureaucrats at the highest levels of implementation consistently oppose equality and avow their adherence to inequality of education, it is unlikely that we are going to get anywhere very fast. When the President of the United States opposes busing children to school, a practice in which some 18 million children are involved every day, the cause of racial integration is not promoted. We hear public officals quoting their non-white domestic employees as authorities on race relations, or they express great concern about "imposing burdens" on minority children, rather than facing the real issue of equality of opportunity. This is racism supreme.

At the very least, minority groups and majority groups disadvantaged by lack of contact with others who are different from them, have a right to expect that public statements and actions will be geared toward equality, even if a lack of commitment exists.

Room at the Bottom for Responsibility

On second thought, it may be a real "cop out" to place too great a share of responsibility on national leadership. When there is no commitment at the local level, it is unreasonable to expect that something will happen at the

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top of the mountain. The same people who now delay desegregation at the local level by quoting national leadership did not make any sincere or forthright efforts to do anything even when statements from the national leadership were more positive. Even today, they do not quote the U.S. Supreme Court, but deem it more satisfying to quote certain officials like the President or the U.S. Attorney General who are expressing individual points of view, not points of law. It is interesting that these are the same people who affirm their devotion and dedication to law and order. Their refusal to enforce laws, except as those laws fit their individual biases, is appalling.

One byproduct of the indecision at the national level has been the development of considerable confusion regarding *de facto* segregation, as opposed to *de jure*. The former, supposedly based on the concept that the housing situation has had an impact on racial and ethnic compositions of the schools, is perceived by some to be beyond the scope of law at the present time. The latter form of segregation, *de jure*, purportedly is governmentally organized, condoned and maintained. The distinction is spurious.

For one thing, there is plenty of evidence that so-called *de facto* segregation is partly a result of governmental action. Specifically, federal court decisions in Long Island, in Detroit and elsewhere have clearly asserted that attendance lines have caused segregation in the schools. Practices of school boards have added problems as well.

In the second place, too great a reliance is placed on the neighborhood school. There is no educational or legal soundness behind the concept of the neighborhood school—why should schools be neighborhood institutions, when shopping, jobs, religious institutions, or places of recreation, for example, are not always in the immediate vicinity of where one lives?

Thirdly, as schools are desegregated, it may no longer be an advantage to the white majority to select a place to live according to the particular school to which the child will go. It could well be that school desegregation can lead to housing desegregation as well as the reverse.

Further, if we examine the concerns about the flight of whites from the cities, the threat posed by: "If you desegregate the schools, we will move out" might well vanish. It would be highly preferable that this kind of "whitemail" vanish from our society.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the issue of *de facto* versus *de jure* is specious for anyone concerned with the welfare of children. If segregation is bad for children, then it is bad, whether governmentally, societally or individually organized.

Local Moods Cow School Officials

A significant element that should be recognized with regard to the negative statements by national leaders is that there is a parallel trend in evidence at the local level. Along with the continuing deprivation of cities and the growth of population in suburbs has come a decidedly strong swing to the right in state legislatures across the country. Exemplary of this shift are the so-called "anti-busing" laws, such as the now aborted and unconstitutional Chapter 342 of the New York State Education Law which attempted to prevent the Commissioner of Education from ordering desegregation. One of the consequences of this trend is that even when educators have both the power and the inclination to eradicate racial inequalities in the schools, their concern about the possible overall loss to education resulting from such definitive steps now tends to produce second thoughts in some of those who might otherwise move forward more vigorously. Thus, they sometimes content themselves with forthright and courageous public addresses rather than initiating actions.

Another deterrent to racial integration is a growing resistance from many white ethnic groups to recent social and educational gains by blacks and other socially visible minorities, particularly in the eastern United States. They, too, feel oppressed that they are not getting their share of the benefits of a wealthy society. They seem to say: "If you do it for them, you ought to be doing it for us, too!"

While it may not be an exact parallel, the reactions of the more militant and dissatisfied elements of minority communities may also be serving as a deterrent to desegregation. Years of haphazard attempts at desegregation with no real commitment on the part of many whites, along with the distinct possibility that there will be no real integration after desegregation takes place, have combined to impel more communities to opt for community control, decentralization, or continuation of some variation of segregated education. While this phenomenon is understandable, since integration is not really taking place, it must be recognized that these alternatives to desegregation tend to retard progress toward integrated education.

One of the more covert deterrents is the developing pattern of teacher organization and teacher militancy. Teachers and their organizations are insisting more and more upon contracts which assure the maintenance and continuation of the *status quo*. We find specific agreements regarding teacher assignment and transfer and in-service training, whether it is to be voluntary or mandatory, on school time or on the teacher's own time, with salary, increment credit, service credit or no credit. While teacher organization and teacher militancy have certainly resulted in some most important and productive gains in American education, they cannot be permitted to place serious obstacles in the path of achieving equal educational opportunity in the American school.

Teachers' Fears Deter Integration

In one instance with which I am familiar, teachers blocked the implementation of a research program which would have substantially increased documentary evidence of the value of integrated education. They did so because they were fearful that the project might reveal racism among some of the teaching staff and possibly lead to dismissal, loss of tenure, community furor, or something similar.

One of the more pervasive deterrents to increased racial desegregation is the educational establishment itself. It

moves and changes slowly and deliberately. One doctoral dissertation studied the length of time which elapsed between the conception of an educational idea and its actual implementation in a large city's school system. The finding was that the average length of time was fifty years. Given this resistance to any kind of change, when the change is coupled with the highly emotional factor of race, it is small wonder that progress toward desegregation is slow.

To make matters worse, many educators fail to recognize that, by definition, segregated education cannot be good education. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision was to have made this clear when it said "...separate is not equal and cannot result in good education...." However, in one case, during a discussion of the progress of education in a particular school district, an educator commented, "You people [integrationists] do not realize how much harm you have done to educational progress by insisting on desegregation." This comment adequately sums up an attitude which is, unfortunately, all too common.

Let us examine the furor about busing. As the U.S. Supreme Court eloquently pointed out in the 1971 Charlotte-Mecklenberg decision over 18 million children (or about 39%), are bused to school every day in America. School boards regularly vote funds for transporting half or even all of the children in their districts, yet vigorously pass resolutions opposing busing for purposes of desegregation.

The myths which are so common in American society easily surface in discussions of this subject:

"The cost will be too great for the taxpayer to bear." Yet, many transportation programs save school district money, while numerous others are refunded all or in part from more equitably funded sources, such as state or federal governments.

"Our children will be faced with safety hazards." But all available statistics indicate that the safest way to get to school is by bus.

"The President is opposed to busing." Yet the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that busing for purposes of integration is legal.

"This is an intolerable burden on parents because of having to get up earlier, increased care of children, etc." But most busing is for comparatively short distances and requires little additional time in getting up in the morning. Further, many parents have additional time because elementary school children now remain in school for lunch.

"My rights are being violated by having my children bused across town." It is the responsibility of the board of education, not parents, to assign children to schools. Again, most busing is for comparatively short distances and not across town.

"Their schools are not as good as ours." Yet, professional educators almost invariably allege that education in all schools in the district is equal. When integration takes place, formerly black schools are abruptly upgraded as white children are enrolled.

Most of these pious assertions are actually avoidance of the real issue. It is noteworthy that some city dwellers in Detroit, for example, vehemently opposed busing when it was within the city. Now they vigorously support busing exchanges with the suburbs since a recent federal court decision posed this possibility.

Desegregation Is Not Compensatory Education

No one would deny that many members of minority groups are economically disadvantaged. However, the equating of compensatory education with desegregation of schools exemplifies a critical kind of racism prevalent in our society. What some parents are saying is that being poor, black, Puerto Rican, Mexican-American or Indian suggests inferiority. They fear a loss of good education to their children if all social classes and races are mixed.

The Coleman Report addresses itself directly to the question of social class desegregation. Some people opposed to racial desegregation are wont to quote from Coleman and imply that mere racial desegregation by itself will prove to be unsuccessful. We should strive for social class desegregation, but this is sometimes used to prevent racial desegregation. We cannot permit this to happen.

Further, educators indulge in "victim analysis," instead of analyzing their schools. For example, some teachers suggest that if children would behave, talk, look, or act more in line with the teacher's standards, they would get a better education. The recent Council on Basic Education study says the school, not the children, is responsible for low achievement. What kind of teacher training turns out teachers able only to teach white middle-class children?

Underneath it all, if we are really to be honest about the matter, it must be admitted that school desegregation is only one aspect of the overriding issue—that those with power are unwilling to relinquish power or any part of it. The reasoning proceeds that if "they" obtain equality of opportunity in employment, housing, public accommodations, in social relationships, and, most of all, in education, "they" will expect to be equal in other ways—the acquisition of and maintenance of power. And this is regarded as impermissible.

It should be concluded that at least one aspect of the issue of school desegregation often identified as a deterring factor really is not: social class is not related to learning ability. The comments above, for example, in regard to teachers' preferences, not their abilities, for teaching middle-class children exemplify this mind set.

Lack of Know-How or Lack of Commitment?

Besides these factors working against school desegregation, the process of integration has failed to receive full attention once black and white children are together in the classroom. Some school administrators allege that we do not know how to integrate our schools or to provide adequate education under a new set of circumstances. This just is not true. As educators, we believe we know how to educate all children under almost any circumstances. It seems highly likely that our failure to utilize what we know may really be an indication of lack of basic commitment to equality.

We must be more concerned with what happens to the child after he is reassigned to a school he had not expected to attend. When the experience is not a

successful and satisfactory one for the child, it is generally because preparation and follow-up are inadequate.

It is crucial that an adequate in-service training program for administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and non-professional staff be undertaken. This connot be a one-shot affair. It must be continuous and focused on real issues. It cannot be designed solely to assist the participants in understanding themselves better. In short, it should be an experiential situation in which the primary concern is providing the best kind of education for children of all races and ethnic groups. Sensitivity training or any variation of it will not suffice, although sensitivity training techniques may well be a part of the process of zeroing in on racial issues.

Adequate in-service education programs should be mandatory, rather than voluntary, for the participants. They should seek to enhance growth or change in three specific areas. First, it is necessary for school people to have adequate knowledge and information about race, culture, social class, the psychology of being minority group members, prejudice, discriminatory practices, and so on.

Second, educators should be provided experience in developing skills and techniques for teaching in desegregated and integrated situations. This is quite different from teaching uni-racial groups of children. All too often teachers and administrators who are assumed to be adequately experienced in teaching in desegregated situations have come out of minority situations in which paternalism, brutalization of children, or lack of recognition of the dignity of the individual are all too evident. This suggests that just because one has had experience with minority children, he is not necessarily equipped to deal with an integrated school situation. What he does need are tools and skills and approaches to such phenomena as a wider range of reading ability within a classroom, negative or superior self-images of youngsters, and intergroup tensions and conflicts (sometimes fomented by parents).

Teachers and Texts Need Overhaul

Finally, an adequate education program should recognize and face up to the fact that teacher expectations and attitudes regarding minorities and their likely performance are heavily skewed away from the positive. It makes little sense to say to teachers or other staff, "There is something wrong with your attitudes, so I am going to retrain you so that your attitudes will become as good as mine." Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the fact that negative attitudes and expectations do exist and their change shoud be an integral goal of any type of in-service program.

This is also the point at which the already existing curriculum should be examined in terms of its relevance and appropriateness to the needs of all children. The kinds of library facilities, textbooks, audiovisual materials, and other materials used should be reviewed and revised or discarded, as needed.

Some new administrative arrangements should now be undertaken. Thus, appropriate arrangements should be made to assure that children are not faced with the hazards of inclement weather because school doors are closed and locked at certain set hours. Rearrangement of the schedules for such activities as the safety patrol and hall duties should be undertaken so that children who do not live near the school may still participate in these honorary activities. They should not be retricted by bus schedules. In the same vein, the recruitment and composition of cheerleading squads, student government, athletic teams and so on should be reviewed and adjustments made to insure that heterogeneity results.

Reviews concerning whether or not certain sports are identified as "white sports" or "minority sports" should also be undertaken. It is not unrealistic to expect that the swimming, golf, and tennis teams will have the same degree of heterogeneity as do the football, basketball, and track teams. While many of these may seem insignificant and unimportant, they are considerations which are crucial to children and their perception of whether or not the school welcomes them.

In summary, important deterrents to successful integration may well be those school factors that come to bear after the physical act of placing black and white children together in the classroom.

Desegregation and integration can only succeed when there is a will to succeed. It is time educators, not courts, become responsible for education.

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